

# **GATE**

**EDUCATION RESOURCE PACK**

***...SISTERS***



**WORLD PREMIERE**  
Gate Theatre and Headlong Theatre present

# **...SISTERS**

By Anton Chekhov  
Adapted and Directed by Chris Goode

**Company**  
Gemma Brockis  
Catherine Dyson  
Julia Innocenti  
Helen Kirkpatrick  
Tom Lyall  
Melanie Wilson

**Designer Naomi Dawson**  
**Lighting Designer Anna Watson**  
**Assistant Director Wendy Hubbard**  
**Assistant Designer Chimaine Sampson**  
**Production Manager Nick Abbott**  
**Stage Manager Steve Tyler**

**Assistant Lighting Designer/Deputy Stage Manager Jack Knowles**  
**Technical Production Assistant Jack Macdonald-Lucas**  
**Assistant Stage Manager Intern Harriet Churchward**  
**Press Clíona Roberts for CRPR [cliona@crpr.co.uk](mailto:cliona@crpr.co.uk) / 07754 756504**  
**Production Photographer Simon Kane**

The Gate Theatre and Headlong Theatre would like thank the following for their help with this production: ArtsEd, Broomer, James Browne, Mark Goddard, The Latvian Centre, Marble, David Mills, Pan Intercultural Arts, Vauxhall City Farm, Victor, Young Vic.

# ***...Sisters***

## **INTRODUCTION:**

This production of *...Sisters* is inspired by the play *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov. Rather than being an adaptation in the traditional sense, *...Sisters* is a re-wiring of the original in which the emotions and concerns of the play are explored through a dramatic motif similar to an improvised jazz-riff. This education pack is designed to give teachers and students background information about the original play and an insight into the production's unique playing style and rehearsal process. The aim is to enhance students' understanding by providing material to contextualise the production and allow an insider's view of staging the show.

## **CONTENTS:**

- Synopsis of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov
- Anton Chekhov – Timeline 1860-1904
- BIOGRAPHY: ANTON CHEKHOV (1860-1904)
- Finding the Emotional Tones of *Three Sisters*
- Experiments in Realism: A Performance History of *Three Sisters*
- Re-wiring *Three Sisters*: The approach to devising *...Sisters*
- Assistant Director's Rehearsal Diary Extract
- Chris Goode on adapting and directing *...Sisters*
- The Theatre Critics on *...Sisters*
- TIME OUT Magazine Interview with Chris Goode
- Classroom Activity: Trying Out The Rules of Devising

## Synopsis of Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov

### ACT 1

A year after the death of their father, a General, the Prozorov sisters- Olga, Masha and Irina- find their lives in a provincial town increasingly unbearable. Regular visits from soldiers stationed in the town provide the only distraction. Olga is twenty-eight and teaches at the high school. Her work is stressful and unfulfilling, she feels old and tired, and accepting that she is now unlikely to marry, focuses her energy on the hope of selling the house and returning to Moscow where the sisters grew up. Masha, the middle sister, is trapped in the town as she married Kulygin, an older school teacher whom she once found impressive but now finds embarrassing and ridiculous. Irina is twenty and dreams of finding happiness, purpose and love in Moscow. The laziness of her life frustrates and enervates her. Their brother Andrei hopes to be an academic but finds it hard to get any work done. He has fallen in love with Natasha, a local woman; his sisters find it hard to believe that he will marry her and tease him mercilessly. Act One takes place on Irina's birthday. The sisters' visitors include Chebutykin, a sixty year old army doctor who loved the sisters' mother who rents a room in their house; Baron Tuzenbach, thirty, a lieutenant in love with Irina; and the erratic Captain Solyony. The new commander of the battery, Vershinin, forty-two, arrives to introduce himself. He has two daughters and a second wife who frequently threatens suicide to annoy him. A birthday cake is sent by Protopopov, head of the District Council. The sisters hope Protopopov will marry Natasha, but when she arrives for the birthday party Andrei proposes to her and she accepts him.

### ACT 2

Natasha and Andrei are married and have a child, Bobick. Natasha has taken over the running of the house, dominating the sisters, her husband and the servants. She takes Irina's bedroom for her baby, asking Irina to share with Olga. Vershinin and Masha are drawn together and Vershinin tells her of his love for her. At first she protests, but quickly changes her mind and encourages him. They are interrupted by Tuzenbach and Irina. The Baron has resigned his post in the army and is intending to find some satisfying work in civil life. Irina is working for the Post Office, but frustrated by the boredom and bureaucracy, is still obsessed with her hope of discovering happiness in Moscow. The Baron continues to hope that she will marry him. The sisters are worried: Andrei, frustrated at his failure to become a Professor and now disappointed in Natasha, is gambling and losing heavily. Vershinin is called away to deal with another of his wife's suicide attempts. An evening of guests and entertainers had been planned, but Natasha makes Andrei cancel the entertainers on the pretext that the baby is ill and the guest leave. Solyony returns to declare his love to Irina. She rejects him and he swears that he will kill any rival. Natasha receives a message from Protopopov inviting her to take a drive with him in his troika, and she laughingly accepts, saying: "Men are so funny".

### ACT 3

About a year later, at two o'clock in the morning the household is woken up to deal with a fire in the town. Andrei retreats to his room to play the violin. Refugees come to their home for shelter. Natasha, shouting at old Anfisa, the sisters' nurse, openly declares that she is now in charge of the household: Anfisa must go, and Olga and Irina must move to rooms downstairs. Chebutykin is drunk: his way of dealing with having accidentally killed a woman patient the week before. Captain Solyony tries to join the group, resentful at Irina's growing friendship with the Baron, but is sent away. Vershinin brings a rumour that the battery is to be moved from the village. Andrei has mortgaged the house to pay his gambling debts and resigned himself to his life as a member of the Council, and Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov. Masha confesses to her sisters that she is in love with Vershinin. Irina, who is now working for the town council, breaks down in frustration at the growing realisation that they will never leave the town and return to Moscow; Olga encourages her to take the opportunity she has to marry the Baron and escape, and she slowly decides that she will.

### ACT 4

The soldiers are being moved to Poland and visit the sisters to say their goodbyes. Andrei and Natasha have a second child, but Natasha's affair is continuing. Irina is to leave to marry the Baron the next day, despite not loving him; he has work and she is happy at having been accepted for a teacher's position. Olga is now headmistress of her school and is living there with old Anfisa. Vershinin kisses the sobbing Masha farewell, leaving her to her dull but devoted husband. Natasha plans what she will change in the garden once all of the sisters have left. Chebutykin comes to tell Irina that the Baron has been killed in the duel by Solyony, and the three sisters huddle together in grief. Irina decides that she will still leave the town to start work alone. Masha prepares to go home with her husband. As they listen to the military band playing the soldiers out of the town Olga tries to inspire them all with hope that "we might find out any second now why we put ourselves through all this, what it was all for."

## Anton Chekhov – Timeline 1860-1904

**1860** - Born January 29 in [Taganrog, Russia](#).

**1876** – Chekhov’s father declares bankruptcy and flees to Moscow where his two eldest sons are living. He takes the whole family with him apart from Anton (Chekhov) whom he leaves behind to finish his education and sell off remaining possessions.

**1879** - Chekhov re-joins his family in Moscow, having gained a place at Moscow Medical University. Having settled in Moscow Chekhov assumes responsibility for the family and supports both them and himself through writing short stories.

**1887** – Chekhov wins the Pushkin Prize for “best literary production distinguished by high artistic worth.”

**1894** – Chekhov starts writing *The Seagull* in his country villa in Melikhovo

**1896** – *The Seagull* premieres at the Alexandrinsky Theatre and is a fiasco booed by the audience and ridiculed by critics. Chekhov renounces theatre.

However the play catches the attention of another playwright Nemirovich-Danchenko who is so impressed by it he convinces [Constantin Stanislavski](#) to direct it for the innovative [Moscow Art Theatre](#) in 1898. Stanislavski's attention to psychological realism and ensemble playing coaxed the buried subtleties from the text and restored Chekhov's interest in playwriting. The Art Theatre commissioned more plays from Chekhov and the following year staged *Uncle Vanya*, which Chekhov had completed in 1896. Chekhov and Stanislavski become great collaborators and work together for the rest of Chekhov's life.

**1897** – Chekhov suffers a major lung haemorrhage of the lungs and with great difficulty is admitted to hospital. The doctors diagnose tuberculosis in the upper part of his lungs and order a change of lifestyle.

**1898** – Chekhov's father dies and he buys a villa in Alushta near Yalta and moves there with his sisters and mother. He plants trees there and keeps dogs and tame cranes. He entertains Tolstoy there, and with great difficulty writes ***Three Sisters*** and *The Cherry Orchard* for the Art Theatre which each take him over a year to write.

**1901**- 25 May Chekhov marries Olga Knipper an actress a former protégée and sometime lover of Nemirovich-Danchenko whom he had first met at rehearsals for *The Seagull*. They share a peculiar marital arrangement whereby she stays in Moscow to pursue her acting career and he largely in his villa in Yalta. Of marriage he wrote, “give me a wife who, like the moon, won't appear in my sky every day.”



**1904** – Chekhov dies finally from tuberculosis on holiday with his wife Olga in Germany. He is 44 years old. She wrote of the event:

“Anton sat up unusually straight and said loudly and clearly (although he knew almost no [German](#)): *Ich sterbe*. The doctor calmed him, took a syringe, gave him an injection of [camphor](#), and ordered champagne. Anton took a full glass, examined it, smiled at me and said: "It's a long time since I drank champagne." He drained it, lay quietly on his left side, and I just had time to run to him and lean across the bed and call to him, but he had stopped breathing and was sleeping peacefully as a child...”

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

## BIOGRAPHY: ANTON CHEKHOV (1860-1904)



Born on January 29, 1860, in Taganrog, Russia, on the Sea of Azov, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov would eventually become one of Russia's most cherished storytellers. Especially fond of vaudevilles and French farces, he produced some hilarious one-acts, but it is his full-length tragedies that have secured him a place among the greatest dramatists of all time.

Chekhov began writing short stories during his days as a medical student at the University of Moscow. After graduating in 1884 with a degree in medicine, he began to freelance as a journalist and writer of comic sketches. Early in his career, he mastered the form of the one-act and produced several masterpieces of this genre including *The Bear* (1888) in which a creditor hounds a young widow, but becomes so impressed when she agrees to fight a duel with him, that he proposes marriage, and *The Wedding* (1889) in which a bridegroom's plans to have a general attend his wedding ceremony backfire when the general turns out to be a retired naval captain "of the second rank".

*Ivanov* (1887), Chekhov's first full-length play, a fairly immature work compared to his later plays, examines the suicide of a young man very similar to Chekhov himself in many ways. His next play, *The Wood Demon* (1888) was also fairly unsuccessful. In fact, it was not until the Moscow Art Theater production of [The Seagull](#) (1897) that Chekhov enjoyed his first overwhelming success. The same play had been performed two years earlier at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg and had been so badly received that Chekhov had actually left the auditorium during the second act and vowed never to write for the theatre again. But in the hands of the Moscow Art Theatre, the play was transformed into a critical success, and Chekhov soon realized that the earlier production had failed because the actors had not understood their roles.

In 1899, Chekhov gave the Moscow Art Theatre a revised version of *The Wood Demon*, now titled *Uncle Vanya* (1899). Along with [The Three Sisters](#) (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), this play would go on to become one of the masterpieces of the modern theatre. However, although the Moscow Art Theatre productions brought Chekhov great fame, he was never quite happy with the style that director Constantin Stanislavsky imposed on the plays. While Chekhov insisted that his plays were comedies, Stanislavsky's productions tended to emphasize their tragic elements. Still, in spite of their stylistic disagreements, it was not an unhappy marriage, and these productions brought widespread acclaim to both Chekhov's work and the Moscow Art Theatre itself.

Chekhov considered his mature plays to be a kind of comic satire, pointing out the unhappy nature of existence in turn-of-the-century Russia. Perhaps Chekhov's style was described best by the poet himself when he wrote:

"All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again: 'Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!'"

During Chekhov's final years, he was forced to live in exile from the intellectuals of Moscow. In March of 1897, he had suffered a lung hemorrhage, and although he still made occasional trips to Moscow to participate in the productions of his plays, he was forced to spend most of his time in the Crimea where he had gone for his health. He died of tuberculosis on July 14, 1904, at the age of forty-four, in a German health resort and was buried in Moscow. Since his death, Chekhov's plays have become famous worldwide and he has come to be considered the greatest Russian storyteller and dramatist of modern times.

Courtesy Moonstruck Drama, 2008

## Finding the Emotional Tones of *Three Sisters*

Theatre critics, not knowing what to make of his peculiar mixture of comedy and pathos, often called his plays “plays of mood”, “poems” or compared them to music.

- Milton Ehre, *Chekhov On The Stage*

Perhaps the most poignant moment in all of Chekhov’s plays is in the conclusion of *The Three Sisters*, when the sisters, in counterpoint to the nihilism of Dr Chbutykin, insist upon continuing to hope when all grounds of their hope have evaporated...Chekhov’s men are caught in webs of abstraction. Even when they are mouthing their author’s ideas, they are slightly comic. His women, fragile as they maybe, seem closer to the pulse of life.

-Chekhov For The Stage: *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard*

What happens in the course of the Chekhov play is that the characters are shown responding and reacting to one another on the emotional level: Chekhov creates among them what may be called an emotional network, in which it is not the interplay of character but the interplay of emotion that holds the attention of the audience. ... A kind of electric field exists among all the persons in a Chekhovian group. ... Emotional preoccupations in the Chekhov play do not remain private and submerged, but are brought to the surface as the characters intermingle and become emotionally involved with one another. This as it were activates the emotional network, and emotions may come to vibrate between particular individuals. ... It is on occasions such as these, when the emotional network is vibrating with an unusually high degree of harmony or disharmony, that the characters' emotional preoccupations are likely to be most clearly revealed.

— Harvey Pitcher, *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation* (Chatto & Windus, 1973)

Chekhov wrote the play, about three unhappy women longing for meaning in their lives, for the Moscow Art Theater, which presented it in 1901. Stanislavsky, who directed it and performed in it, believed the play is not about characters who are bored with life but about those who desperately want to live.

-MARINA LAKHMAN, New York Times, 1 February 1998

# Experiments in Realism: A Performance History of *Three Sisters*



---

by Nicole Quenelle, Little Green Pig Theater Company, 2008

"I write life -- this gray, everyday life -- But that does not mean annoying moaning and groaning." -- Chekhov

In the winter of 1900, the acting company of the famed Moscow Art Theater (MXAT) sat down to read aloud *Three Sisters* -- the latest work by the playwright who had become a permanent fixture of the MXAT and whose name would later become synonymous with Russian literature itself: Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. It did not go well

Upon completion of the reading, the acting company was uncomfortable. Some of them were weeping. The director was dissatisfied. And Chekhov, at the center of it all, was thoroughly perplexed.

"He thought he had written a happy comedy and all of us considered the play a tragedy and even wept over it,"<sup>1</sup> noted the director, Constantin Stanislavsky, who became famous for the approach to acting training resulting in realism and naturalism that dominated Russian theater of the time and later became a standard of acting (albeit bastardized) in the United States in the 1920's. As he was wont to do, Stanislavsky was probably being melodramatic, exaggerating a bit. In fact, unlike any of his other plays, Chekhov had labeled *Three Sisters* a "drama". Being frequently at odds with Stanislavsky over matters of interpretation (he often accused the director of willfully ignoring his intention and meaning and turning what he considered comedies into weepy melodramas), a misunderstanding of the kind would not have been unusual. But even Chekhov was highly unlikely to have deemed the work a happy comedy, noting himself that the play "has an atmosphere more gloomy than gloom itself."<sup>2</sup>

No, the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the acting company and their director was even simpler: they just didn't get it. The roles weren't proper. Nothing seemed to happen. The action of the play plodded along in a gray haze with only the suggestion of a theme. When the play opened on January 31, 1901, audiences and critics were equally unsure. "What is it about?" "Why are the plot and character motivations so vague?" "What happens?"

Chekhov's actors, audiences and critics, however, should have been somewhat familiar with at least some of the common mysteries of his writing. Indeed, like his other major works, the many themes behind *Three Sisters* (the yearning for love and meaning in life, the necessity of work and its hardships, the sorrow of aging, the elusiveness of happiness) are multi-layered and subtle, with much of the major events happening in the subtext, and in what is left unsaid and unseen--giving the acting company a harder job to convey the meaning behind the subtext and, depending on their success, giving the audience a more or less hard job picking up on that subtext.

Despite the initial uncertainty, *Three Sisters* gradually gained popularity and went on to become a staple in Russian theater--even if part of this initial acceptance may have been due to the intelligentsia of MXAT's audiences paying lip service to the established intelligentsia of the MXAT itself<sup>3</sup>.

In Chekhov's view, the eventual acceptance of the play could only be due in part to the bits of subtext Stanislavsky's direction was capable of revealing. Though, while Chekhov often disagreed with the direction of his work in Stanislavsky's hands, it's unlikely he would have put it in anyone else's. Compared with productions at provincial theaters fraught with inexperience and boredom, Stanislavsky's stagings revealed the characters' hidden emotions and desires behind the seemingly banal conversations and small talk Chekhov wrote for them. Through the director's use of extreme "mood" or "atmosphere" (using both acting techniques, as well as sound and lighting effects), profound emotional significance was brought to the surface, resulting in a reality more intense than ordinary life<sup>3</sup>.

Unfortunately, in Chekhov's view, Stanislavsky's method of achieving heightened reality also resulted in acting that was often heavy-handed, overly dramatic when it should have been subtle, and self indulgent. Speaking of the MXAT acting company, he argued, "With the exception of a couple of performers, none of it's mine...I write life...This gray, everyday life...But that does not mean annoying moaning and groaning...It's really starting to get on my nerves."<sup>3</sup>

Had Chekhov not died of consumption (tuberculosis) three years later, his nerves would have continued to be plucked by the Stanislavsky-inspired productions of realism that swept (and some may argue, plagued) the theaters of Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 30s. Brought to these countries by expatriate members of the MXAT, the productions were overly romantic and nostalgic (even to Stanislavsky himself, who abhorred the American bastardization of his acting techniques). But Europeans and Americans accepted these productions with open arms, assuming that, since they were directed by Russians, they must be what Chekhov, a Russian, intended.

Post World War II, productions in the Soviet Union and Soviet Russia began to shift away from realism, experimenting with new stagings that emphasized the often absurd and cruel nature of the human condition--one that was readily recognizable by audiences that had been victims of postwar Soviet domination.

The United States and other English-speaking countries, however, were slower to shift. With at least 25 published translations and countless adaptations, *Three Sisters* is considered by scholars Chekhov's most widely produced play in the U.S. Though realism is still by far the most chosen staging aesthetic, experimental companies in New York and regional theaters across the U.S., as well as internationally, have slowly but surely begun experimenting with new stagings that challenge audiences and artists to examine the subtext of Chekhov's human condition in the context of our current reality.

Modern Russian productions have provided Western companies with inspiration for experimentation. In a 1970s Taganka Theatre production, for example, director Yury Lyubimov opened the onstage theater wall to reveal the streets of Russia--in all their dank, gray spectacle--as if to show the three Prozorov sisters of the play that their beloved home was not the Mecca they longed for. And in a notable New York adaptation, the experimental Wooster Group used video screens, disparate media and improvisation to weave together the play's context with a more direct questioning of the deep-set beliefs and securities of modern society.

#### Sources:

1. Fen, Elisavera (1954). *Anton Chekhov Plays*. London, England: Penguin Books.
2. John Reid, University of West England. "Tri sestry [Three Sisters]." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 11 March 2003. The Literary Dictionary Company. 6 April 2006.
3. Laurence Senelick, *Anton Chekhov: The Complete Plays*. W.W.Norton & Company, Inc. 2006, pp. *li - lv*.

# **Re-wiring Three Sisters: The approach to devising ...*Sisters***

- **The production is based on the idea of presenting a jazz-riff on the ideas and concerns of the original play.**
- **Like a jazz improvisation, the performance is different every night.**
- **Each actor has learned all the parts, so s/he can, at any point in the show, play any character.**
- **The piece is governed by chance; games such as 'spin the bottle' and 'drawing straws' are played throughout the show to determine which actors take on certain characters.**
- **The show is semi-improvised. Only lines from the original play text are used, but the actors can say them in any order and repeat them or break them up according to the action.**
- **The actors swap roles throughout the piece and sometimes more than one actor plays the same role at the same time. The actors can play characters of either gender.**
- **In rehearsals, the actors played with a box of props and clothes. Out of their improvisations came a prop or item of clothing that always signifies a particular character.**
- **The lighting and sound is also improvised and done live for each performance.**
- **As the show is improvised, the actors must respond to what they give each other in the moment. This is how the director intends to create a sense of 'liveness' on stage.**

## **Assistant Director's Rehearsal Diary Extract**

Today we continued to work on the second act of the play. To do this we went back to the script, reading it and discussing moments, exploring what the vital pieces of information, mood, and tone are for this part of the play and starting to look at how we could faithfully translate the intentions of the original Act into a series of instructions and rules for the performers to improvise with on stage.

This act of the play is set in the evening and is framed by a carnival that is happening all around the sisters' home, but which never arrives on-stage. At the beginning of the act the entertainers have been invited to perform at the house, and are eagerly anticipated as much needed relief from the monotony, but by the end of the Act Natasha (now Andrei's wife) has managed to persuade Andrei to cancel the performance as their little boy is ill and the entertainers are sent away. The act includes some heavy drinking, three very different love scenes, a death threat, a number of stropy outbursts, and some heated exchanges about whether or not humanity is "progressing". Chris had already decided that it would be underscored with music throughout, and would be quite softly lit, with the actors being responsible for some of the lighting, using candles and practical lights on stage.

Having got to know the Act a little, an improvisation was set up using a simple line of chairs. The performers were asked to enter the space and sit, offer and respond to scenes or moments from the Act, and to step out again at any point. At the end of any interaction the performer would leave, and move their chair to the end of the line. The six performers were responsible for working compositionally with this constantly shifting setting, using it to direct our attention sometimes to a single scene between two of them, or a solo moment, but also looking for moments where all six of them could participate in something together. We decided that the mood of the whole act be fluid and shifting, the six performers able to move amongst characters, shifting who they were playing constantly, replicating moments that had already been played, joining in with physical gestures and spoken phrases to create sudden moments of dance-like clarity. The better the performers got to know the scenes the more exciting the decisions they could make-with sudden shifts of mood, playing contrasting scenes simultaneously, or all six of them playing the same character for a moment.

The chair improvisation continues to form the basis of this act in performance: the chairs on stage are set up in a line as a mini audience, and a microphone stand waits for a singer. As the characters wait for the carnival entertainers who never arrive, they entertain themselves in the meantime with emotional game-playing and contemplation.

-Wendy Hubbard, June 2008

## Chris Goode on adapting and directing ...Sisters

What performance you'll see each night, I can't say. I don't know much more about it than you do. Let's call this an informed guess...

There will be six actors on stage, and two technical operators sitting behind you. What they'll be doing is not performing *Three Sisters*, but performing within and around it. Playing hide and seek with it. Slowdancing with it. Taking it to the bridge. From moment to moment, they'll decide which bits of the script to use, and what else, and in what order. I don't know who'll play which characters tonight. At times there may be six sisters, or none. In each scene, certain parameters, hidden and half-revealed, force the actors to think afresh in every moment. No two performances will be the same.

We're doing it this way not because we despise classic plays or we hold Chekhov in contempt, or because we think we can improve on the original. We're doing this because *Three Sisters* — which we love — is a theatre text, not a literary work. Theatre is live and liquid; it ebbs and flows and, at the end of the night, it disappears completely. Let others express their love in more conventional ways. We came here to dance.

## Designer Naomi Dawson on designing ...Sisters

Designing ...SISTERS has meant working not only with the text, but also crafting a space which the actors completely inhabit, and within which they can create a new piece of work each night. Locations, costumes and props are layered on top of one another allowing multiple choices and interpretations, whilst the walls of the room counteract this by reminding us constantly of its limitations.

## Assistant Lighting Designer Jack Knowles on the live-lighting challenge of ...Sisters

The process for lighting ...SISTERS had to be adapted from the more conventional structure. The nature of the performance has meant that by responding to the actors, I recreate the lighting design live, during each performance. To enable me to make decisions about the lighting I have had to gain a strong understanding not only of the game of the piece, but more importantly how the actors play it, twisting the rules and exploring Chekhov's original. Having been present throughout the whole rehearsal period I have witnessed a range of possibilities, how different the moments from the original text can be played and the effects they have on an already established scene. Within the structure of the Lighting Designer's design, my role is performative, but unlike the actors, my performance happens in the lighting box.

## The Theatre Critics on ...Sisters

TIME OUT, 16 June 08 - Caroline McGinn

"This improvisatory piece, where the actors are prompted by random cues, games and sheer whim to riff on the themes of Chekhov's play, is like jazz-theatre. And like jazz, it has a yearning, lyrical impact, thanks equally to the live talent of the performers and their inspired original score."

FINANCIAL TIMES, 15 June - Ian Shuttleworth

"His (Goode's) intention here is that, by freeing the play from the textual form so many of us know and allowing the actors to find their own shape for it each time, they and we together might undergo something akin to the experience of performing and watching it for the first time today."

THE GUARDIAN, 16 June - Lyn Gardner

"You simultaneously know and don't know what is coming next. It shakes up your expectations, makes all your certainties uncertain, and is constantly illuminating and reordering the relationships...there is something intensely pure about Goode's vision and the way it is realised by an extraordinary cast and a technical crew who, like the actors, must respond second by second to each other."

## TIME OUT Magazine

### Chris Goode: interview with the Director of *...Sisters*

By Jane Edwardes

Monday 2 June 2008

#### Chris Goode tells Time Out how he hopes to release the inner play within Chekhov's 'Three Sisters'

Those of us who fly the flag for theatre are apt to bang on about its liveness, in contrast to the fact that George Clooney will always deliver the same performance on celluloid indifferent to whether the cinema is empty or full. But equally we know that many theatre productions might as well be dead, as the actors plod through the same script, night after night, giving the same performances. As a result, many theatremakers have become interested in taking up the challenge to exploit the difference between theatre and film, and to heighten the live connection between actors and audience to create shows that really do change every night. Improbable has been keeping itself and its fans on their toes for years.

Over at the Lyric Studio, Cartoon de Salvo in 'Hard Hearted Hannah' is currently improvising a different story at every performance, inspired by a title suggested by someone in the audience. And, in the same spirit, theatrical form-buster, Chris Goode, in collaboration with Headlong and the Gate Theatre, is about to present a semi-improvised version of Chekhov's 'Three Sisters', based on Goode's adaptation, with just six actors, only one of whom is a man, and any of whom can play a sister whenever they feel moved to do so. Theoretically, they could all be playing Masha simultaneously, a chorus of women hysterical at the thought of Vershinin's departure. Theoretically, the sisters could finally make it to Moscow. This is dangerous territory given that Chekhov's fans are both legion and proprietorial, as shown by the outrage when Katie Mitchell made radical changes to 'The Seagull' at the National Theatre. At least, Goode's title '*...Sisters*' is fair warning to the purists.

Goode's previous productions include the inventive and quirky 'Longwave' and 'Hippo World Guest Book', which traced the rise and fall of an online chatroom for hippopotamus enthusiasts. His eclectic, perceptive blog has won him almost as many fans as his theatre work. He has always thrived as an outsider, but in spite of the radical concept, this is a move towards the mainstream in that he is collaborating with Headlong, a company more used to producing straight plays. Furthermore, Goode sees the show as a reaction to the antagonism that's arisen between those who work with plays and those who devise collaboratively in the rehearsal room. 'The idea,' he says, 'that those two things are opposed seems to me delusional. In this instance, I am interested in how some of the techniques that I've used in my devised pieces in the past can be applied to a classic text, in order to release within the play some kind of liveness, responsiveness, and freshness. Chekhov appealed as someone who relates to my interest in text as texture rather than moving information around.' As he explores the story of the three sisters who aspire to leave their provincial town and escape to the stimulation and glamour of Moscow, Goode hopes to be faithful to the aura of the play, which he describes as 'this impulse to move, absolutely constrained by the fear of moving'.

Some decisions are talked about openly before the performance begins; some will be made by drawing names out of a hat; and some will happen in front of the audience, possibly as a result of a quick game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. 'There's a blackboard on the set and a pigeon hole for each of the actors,' he explains, 'so there are different ways of communicating with each other. I'm always very attracted to watching people think on stage, to watching real decisions being made, and real risk calculated as well as taken. A lot of the wiring is going to be visible so that when everything breaks down or goes wonky, it will be very much easier to let the ball drop, to take a breath and start over.'

That is the point. If inspiration is free to soar, it must be possible for it to sink as well. Goode believes that the audience has a role to play too: 'The actors are reading the audience as much as the audience are reading the actors.' And what if they read total bewilderment and panic? With a big grin, Goode replies playfully, 'I can see the actors replicating that very assiduously. I am hoping that there is something rather touching in the candour of sharing bewilderment. But we'll see.'

## Classroom Activity: Trying Out The Rules

Look back over the Approach to Devising ...*Sisters* on page 10. Using the first scene from *Three Sisters* as a basis (see below), try to devise your group's own version of this opening scene according to the devising rules the actors used. To prepare for this exercise, each member of your group will need to learn all the lines in the scene. It will also be helpful to have a box of appropriate props and costume items to play with in the improvisation.

### ACT 1

*The PROSOROV'S house. A living room, with a dining room beyond. Noon. Brilliant sunshine outside. In the dining room, a table is being prepared for lunch.*

*OLGA, in her standard dark blue schoolmistress's dress, with a pile of marking. MASHA, in a black dress and with her hat resting on her knees, lost in a book. IRINA, in a white dress, standing around, deep in thought.*

**OLGA:** A year to the day since Father died. May the fifth. Your name-day, Irina. It was so cold; it was snowing. I never thought I'd get through it. You blacked out or something, you swooned. And now a year's gone by and it doesn't hurt to talk about it any more. It's nice that you're wearing white again, you look lovely in white.

*The clock strikes twelve.*

The clock struck twelve on the day he died, do you remember.

*Pause.*

There was music playing at the funeral, and they all let off their guns at the cemetery. There he was, a general, commander of a brigade, and hardly anyone showed up. Of course it was raining and raining and sleeting and snow.

**IRINA:** Don't keep going on about it.

*BARON TUZENBACH, CHEBUTYKIN and SOLYONY can be seen by the dining-room table.*

**OLGA:** Today it's lovely and warm; a window-opening sort of day. Though the birches aren't out yet. Eleven years since Father took charge of his brigade and we all left Moscow with him. I remember as if it were yesterday. It was early May, like it is today, and everything in Moscow was blooming, it was warm and wonderfully sunny. Eleven years ago and yet I remember it all as if it happened only yesterday. Oh Lordy Lordy Lord. I woke up this morning and there was brilliant light and I felt full of the joys of spring and all I wanted to do was to go back home to Moscow.

**CHEZBUTYKIN:** Fat chance.

**TUZENBACH:** Absolute rot.

*MASHA, lost in her book, softly whistles an annoying tune.*

**OLGA:** That's enough, Masha! Please. Honestly.

*Pause.*

I'm at school all day and I do extra lessons in the evenings, I seem to have a constant headache. And my mind's so befuddled, as if I were a confused old woman. You know, over the four years that I've been working at the school, I've felt as though e

very day my youth and my get-up-and-go are just leaking away, drip drip drip. The only thing that gets stronger and more intense is this longing—

**IRINA:** To go to Moscow. To sell the house and drop everything here and go to Moscow.

**OLGA:** Exactly! To go to Moscow. And as soon as possible.

*CHEBUTYKIN and TUZENBACH laugh.*

**IRINA:** Even if Andrei becomes a professor, which he probably will, he won't want to stay here anyway. It's only Masha who has to stay, poor thing.

**OLGA:** Well she can always come and visit us in Moscow for the summer, can't she.

*MASHA whistling again.*

**IRINA:** I hope to God it all works out all right.

*IRINA looks out of the window.*

What a lovely day. Why am I so happy? This morning I remembered it was my name-day, and suddenly I felt happy. I thought about when we were children and Mother wasn't dead yet. I thought some beautiful things, I thought amazing things.

**OLGA:** You're so radiant today. I've never seen you look so lovely. And Masha looks lovely too. And Andrei looks... fine. I mean, obviously it's a shame he's got fat and let himself go. As for me, I'm just a crone, a skeleton. I get so agitated with the girls at school. At least I have the day off today, and I'm here at home, and I don't have a headache for once and I feel younger than I felt this time yesterday. I'm only twenty-eight, after all. It's all all right, it's fine. Mind you I think if I got married and didn't have to work, that would probably be even better.

*Pause.*

I'd definitely love my husband, personally.

**TUZENBACH:** [to SOLYONY] I can't listen to your nonsense any more.

*They go into the living room.*

**HEADLONG:** hedl'ong/ noun 1. with head first, 2. starting boldly, 3. to approach with speed and vigour.

Headlong Theatre is dedicated to new ways of making theatre. By exploring revolutionary writers and practitioners of the past and commissioning new work from artists from a wide variety of backgrounds we aim constantly to push the imaginative boundaries of the stage. Under the Artistic Directorship of Rupert Goold (Olivier Award winner for Best Director, 2008), Headlong makes exhilarating, provocative and spectacular new work to take around the country and around the world.

**'Rupert Goold is one of the most exciting young talents in British theatre today'** Times

**'Wild, mad and deeply intelligent theatre'** Sunday Times

**'Tackling issues with extraordinary theatrical audacity... a company that clearly intends to continue boldly'** Financial Times

**COMING SOON FROM HEADLONG:**

**SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR** by Luigi Pirandello, adapted by Rupert Goold and Ben Power, directed by Rupert Goold. Minerva Theatre Chichester: 28th June - 23rd August 2008

**EDWARD GANT'S AMAZING FEATS OF LONELINESS** by Anthony Neilson, directed by Steve Marmion. On tour in Spring 2009.

**KING LEAR** by William Shakespeare, directed by Rupert Goold. Featuring Pete Postlethwaite. Everyman Theatre Liverpool: 30th October - 29th November 2008.

**Headlong Theatre is:**  
Artistic Director Rupert Goold  
Executive Producer Henny Finch  
Finance Manager Julie Renwick  
Literary Associate Ben Power  
Assistant Producer Jenni Kershaw  
Administrative Assistant Lindsey Alvis

For more information or to join our mailing list, please go to [www.headlongtheatre.co.uk](http://www.headlongtheatre.co.uk).  
You can also contact us on 020 7438 9940 or [info@headlongtheatre.co.uk](mailto:info@headlongtheatre.co.uk)





The Gate, London's international theatre, is renowned for its inventive use of space and the exceptional artists it attracts. An environment in which artists can create first-class and original theatre, the Gate is a springboard for opportunity, allowing emerging artists to excel and make their mark. With an average audience capacity of seventy, the space has challenged and inspired directors and designers for over 28 years, making it famous for being one of the most flexible and transformable spaces in London.

As joint Artistic Directors, Natalie Abrahami and Carrie Cracknell are particularly influenced by European dance theatre and continue to create international work of the highest standard, which is peerless and provocative, and provides audiences with a unique experience.

For more information about the Gate's work and how to support it, please visit [www.gatetheatre.co.uk](http://www.gatetheatre.co.uk)

Artistic Directors **Natalie Abrahami and Carrie Cracknell**

Producer **Jo Danvers**

General Manager **Undine Engelmann**

Production and Technical Manager **Nick Abbott**

Education and Access Manager **Lynne Gagliano**

Assistant Producer **Sam Sargant**

Finance Assistant **Amelie Sok**

Interns **Clare Mason, Sally Rose**

Duty Managers **Sarah Bedford, Tom Coyne, Theresa Pine,**

Box Office **Lindsey Alvis, Alex Crampton,**

**Clemmie Forfar, Jenni Halton, Louisa Sanfey**

**The Gate Theatre Board of Trustees**

**Kevin Cahill (Chair), Jonathan Hull (Secretary), Pim Baxter, Mark Bayley, Diane Berger, Rupert Christiansen,**

**Susan Hitch, Rima Horton and Colin Simon**

Development Associate **Cory Edelman Moss**

### **Education at The Gate**

Education forms a vital part of our work at the Gate. We aim to offer education activities that encourage local people of all ages to investigate the process of making theatre and to explore the diverse, vibrant theatre practices represented by our international repertoire and our multicultural community.

#### ***Work for Education Groups***

**The Gate welcomes university and school groups. We offer special reduced rate ticket prices for students, and we have a wide-ranging programme of free education events to accompany each production. In-school workshops, education resource packs, pre and post show discussions, INSET sessions and workshops in the theatre are all available to schools, colleges and universities.**

#### ***Community Work***

**A key element of our education work is devising special community-based events. Our most recent collaborations have included projects with Paddington Integration Project, Dalgarno Community Centre, Fox School and St Cuthberts with St Matthias School. HEAT, our exciting summer festival for young people, also takes place at the Gate in August.**

#### ***Taking Part***

For more information about the Gate's education activities, please contact the Education & Access Manager, Lynne Gagliano, via e-mail: [lynne@gatetheatre.co.uk](mailto:lynne@gatetheatre.co.uk) or phone 020 7229 5387. Lynne works on Mondays and Thursdays, 10.30am-5pm.

**...Sisters Education Resource Pack compiled and written by Wendy Hubbard and Lynne Gagliano, June 2008.**